

Testimony re HB 4192

House Judiciary Committee  
August 26, 2009

Judith Kovach, Ph.D., L.P.  
Executive Director  
Michigan Psychological Association

Earlier this year, the Michigan Psychological Association Board of Directors unanimously passed a resolution in support of the Kalamazoo anti-discrimination ordinance. The MPA is not an advocacy organization; it is a professional association and its members have diverse opinions and beliefs about many political and social issues. So why did we choose to speak out on legislation that would end discrimination? By virtue of our Code of Ethics, "psychologists are committed to increasing scientific and professional knowledge of behavior and people's understanding of themselves and others and to the use of such knowledge to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society. Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights..." (American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, 2003.) By virtue of our clinical training and experience, we have heard firsthand about the very personal pain and suffering from people denied jobs or housing because of irrelevant personal characteristics such as race, gender, disability, national origin or sexual orientation. By virtue of our graduate training in social science research methodology, we cannot ignore the difference between solid empirical evidence and spurious mislabeled "facts" generated by people's fears and misinformation.

You have heard today from other experts about the scientific research documenting that unfair treatment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity expression is associated with serious mental health consequences such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, substance abuse, and physical health problems.

Scientific surveys since the mid-1990's indicate that between 2.25 million and 6.5 million gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans have suffered employment discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Work is a major determinant of mental health and a socially integrating force. To be excluded from the workforce creates material deprivation, erodes self-confidence, creates a sense of isolation and marginalization and is a key risk factor for psychological distress.

Therefore, as psychologists, we cannot stand by when we see one group singled out and denied the same civil rights, the same protection against discrimination, held by the great majority of Michigan citizens. But it is more than that. The fact

that bills that would amend the Civil Rights Act to include "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" have been debated and voted down in previous legislative sessions and now once again are being debated in the Michigan legislature and in municipalities in the state, only contributes to the negative psychological consequences of discrimination against the LGBT community. Can you imagine how you would feel if your elected officials debated whether you were worthy of the same rights accorded to everyone else because you are different from them?

A young man in Portage was beaten last week because he is gay. I have no doubt that each of you would privately and publicly deplore the behavior of his assailants. We should be no less concerned when the wounds are psychological. Does the psychological pain of being told, "We don't hire people like you" hurt less than the physical pain of being beaten? The scientific evidence that you have heard today resoundingly says no.

In her recent book, *Voted Out: The Psychological Consequences of Anti-Gay Politics*, Dr. Glenda Russell describes her extensive research indicating that simply being exposed to anti-gay rhetoric during debates on legislation affecting the civil rights of LGBT persons is psychologically damaging. Discourse and debates such as this hearing, according to Dr. Russell, have "negative implications for the targeted groups... [and] for society as a whole; it is divisive and... invites human beings to act on their least noble impulses. Discourse directed against any group of people is likely to breed fear and aggressiveness simultaneously. Ultimately, it serves no one in society" (Russell, 2000).

Eighty-nine percent of Americans believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people should be protected from being unfairly fired (Gallup poll, May 2007.)

And so I urge you to join with the members of the Michigan Psychological Association to use the knowledge you have gained today to inform your decision-making. All hardworking Michigan citizens should have a chance to earn a living and provide for their families and be safe in their communities. Please take this opportunity to vote against unfair practices and provide full access to employment, housing, and public accommodation regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.